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Chapter Two: The Cracks Start To Show

I was actually excited on my first day of sixth grade. This was the grade I had been waiting for since my first day of school all those years ago. The first big change was my parents let my brother and me ride our bikes to school. No more school bus, no more rides home with Tim's Grandma (who was a wonderful lady, but come on, I was a sixth grader now), and I got a cool rack behind the seat to put my saxophone on. I thought I was bad ass. For a day, I was bad ass. My teacher was this guy Mr. Weber. He was a really cool guy. He was new at our school so they gave him the "average" class since they probably figured he couldn't handle the rough kid class. I had a rude awakening on the first day when I discovered that most of the people I actually got along with were in the good kids class and all the bullies were still there with me. Oh, and there were also new bullies. There was one kid who immediately threw a basketball in my face during the first recess period. We got in a fight. We both got Time Out. This story would repeat itself for pretty much the whole year.

The hardest part about sixth grade was that I was alone for most of the day. Tim was in Junior High now and Sean was fighting his own battles in the rough kid class and his new teacher. Mr. Patton was the teacher that every kid at school feared. I spent second through fifth grade praying I didn't end up in his class. You would even hear things in the school yard sometimes. If you went to Time Out too many times, you wound up in Patton's class. If you didn't do all your assignments, Patton's class. Some kids did thrive in his class though. Mostly the jocks and the biggest of the bullies. The guy was notorious for giving weaker and fat kids a hard time. One of his fat kid students left school and was never seen again. I'm sure the kid might have moved or something but we all thought Patton had made him crack. He was ruthless with the Time Out slips. One time I was in the bathroom when some younger kids decided to stop up the sinks with paper towels. As they ran out the door, Patton grabbed them and started writing slips. I tried to keep my head down but he grabbed me too. I started blubbering (by that point blubbering was my main line of defense) but that only made it worse. Unlike Mr. Weber, who seemed sympathetic to my plight as a fat kid and a product of a broken home, Patton didn't seem to care. Sean had to deal with him every day, all day. I think it was one of the things that really broke him down. He would come out at recess (when he wasn't sent to Time Out, which was quite often that year) and was just a ball of rage.

I would get angry on occasion but most of the time I just didn't have it in me. I was much more suited for depression and I think this was when I started my fall down that rabbit hole. I had finally given up and I started retreating inside my head. One of the popular lunch time activities was a game called Ditch 'em. It was basically hide and seek in reverse. One person would hide and the rest of the kids would hunt for them in a pack. Many times this game ended with me

being the one chosen to hide and the other kids deciding they wanted to play something else. I would end up hiding in the library in plain sight, either reading Sports Illustrated For Kids or using the one modem our computer lab had to send emails to the one other girl at school who knew how to use it. No one ever tried to find me. Other times I would sit in a bathroom stall, hoping that the other boys would come bursting in, pleased to finally find me, and they'd slap me on the back and we'd start the game all over again. That also never happened. Even then I was always hopeful. I figured it was just a matter of time before everyone saw the real me, a cool guy, and we'd all be best friends.

In addition to band, I found another escape in sixth grade. I had been in Cub Scouts for a couple years with Sean and in sixth grade we became Boy Scouts, joining the infamous Troop 774 in Encinitas. I say they were infamous not out of spite. They were an amazing troop. They just didn't operate like your stereotypical Boy Scouts. When you think of scouting you think of nerdy kids in dumb uniforms making bird houses and playing with pocket knives. 774 consisted of a large group of skater kids and creative types in an era where neither of those were "cool." For me that's what made them cool. I had never met kids like that before. They were older and kind of dangerous but not in a bully way. It was through these guys that I would enter the world of skateboarding, amateur videography, and punk rock music. Yes, these guys still could be mean on occasion. They took to calling me "Piggy" after the Lord of the Flies character, but it honestly was never mean spirited. I knew what mean spirited was and these guys weren't it. They were outcasts just like me, they were just a different kind of outcast. They taught me that you didn't have to be miserable as an outcast and that you could actually revel in it. I still put a lot of what I learned from them into practice on a daily basis.

Boy Scouts was also great because Tim and Sean were there and I was spending less time with them since Tim wasn't at my school and Sean was stuck in Patton's class. In addition to that, my dad was pretty into scouting and he would come along on a lot of our trips. This became more and more important as things at home were starting to get rough. For my whole life until this point, no matter how bad things got at school or anywhere else, I had my home and I had my family. I had a mom, dad, and brother who loved me. I had a mom and dad who loved each other and would always love each other. My home and my family were the one thing holding me together as the rest of my life started to unravel. So of course that's when the bottom fell out on that as well.

The problems for me really started when my home life started falling apart. My mom could no longer disguise her alcoholism and it was slowly tearing her marriage apart. When I was in 6th grade, she moved out. Even before that there had been talk of them splitting up. I remember my mom tearfully telling us one day that her and dad weren't going to live together anymore. It made absolutely no sense, but I had no idea what to do about it as I was barely hanging on myself.

My mom comes from a family of alcoholics. She wasn't really the angry stereotypical drunk. I do remember times when she would become this other person. She would yell and

scream at times but my Dad did a pretty amazing job of keeping all that away from us. We would go to the movies pretty much every Friday night and most Saturday mornings. If we didn't go to the movies he would take us into the office with him on Saturdays or Sundays. I have great memories of spending time at my dad's office. It was where I learned how to use a computer. I guess at a certain point my dad just couldn't do it anymore. So my mom moved out and I spent a lot more time home alone with my brother because dad didn't get home until 6 or later.

I did love visiting my mom at her apartment. She must have felt like she had to do something extra special for us because she got HBO and the Disney Channel, something my brother and I had been begging for for years. On days where we would go to my mom's after school I remember being able to drink all the Diet Pepsi I wanted, eating pizza or McDonald's, and watching Kids Incorporated and The Mickey Mouse Club. It definitely kept me from being too sad about my parents being separated.

It still sucked though. When I came home after school on days I wasn't spending with my mom, the house was empty. My brother had lots of friends so he was usually playing with them. Sean was dealing with his own home problems most of the time and Tim had a completely different schedule since he was in Jr. High. I spent a lot of time by myself, reading books in my room or endlessly organizing my baseball cards. When Tim got home I would spend my time over there but I just started feeling like I was floating away. The image that comes to mind is from a book about Disneyland my uncle got me when I was very young. I loved that book and read it at least a hundred times. There were hundreds of beautiful pictures of concept art and of the rides and movies but this one stood out to me. It was an animatronic boy in "It's a Small World" who was holding on to a balloon and he was just floating away. I wondered why no one was there to help him and what was going to happen. Sometimes it seemed almost peaceful. I felt like that boy. I both wanted to float away and I was also terrified of it. The idea that I could just disappear and no one would care was slowly creeping into my brain as a reality. I still look at that boy every single time I go on that ride and it takes me right back to those years when I would think about him constantly.

I am not sure if it's because it was a different time or what, but no one seemed to be aware that I was showing the early signs of depression as plain as day. I know my parents did their best but they were wrapped up in their own stuff at the time. I don't think other kids really knew what depression was. As far as other adults, I was just one of those kids who slipped through the cracks since I wasn't a bad kid and I wasn't really a typical GATE kid. Those are the two groups of kids who get the majority of the teacher's and other staff's attention in a school situation. Most of the middle of the road kids manage just fine. Then there are the kids like me, Tim, and Sean who were all suffering in our own ways but because it was mostly internal and there weren't any simple solutions, the teachers just didn't know what to do with us. So most of them did nothing. I don't blame them. They had much bigger fish to fry; the psychopath in my class, for instance.

As I discussed earlier, Sean was having some major issues. He was having a really hard

time at school and as fucked up as my home life was, his was much worse. I don't feel comfortable going into specifics since this is not his story and he has suffered quite a bit in this life. Let's just leave it at it was really fucked up. Things were tense between us during this time period. Most of the time we were cool. Best buds as always. Then sometimes we were trying to beat the shit out of each other for no apparent reason. I've punched someone in the face three times in my entire life. One time was my little brother in a McDonald's on a Boy Scout trip for a reason I can't remember. I am willing to bet he mouthed off to me one too many times and I just snapped. That happened quite frequently. I will never forget the shock on his face when I decked him. It still hurts me thinking about it. That's probably why I never did it again. The second time was a kid in Junior High, which we'll get to later in this story. The third time was when I decked Sean in front of my whole class. I don't remember the circumstances, I just remember it felt good and for a little while people stopped giving me shit. So yeah, Sean and I weren't always hanging out at the time. That is how Joe entered the picture.

I immediately thought Joe was cool because he would sneak a boombox to school in his backpack and during recess he would play rap music at a level loud enough for a few people surrounding it to hear but low enough for none of the yard duties to notice. I don't know what it is about my personality, but I am drawn to rebels. I have pretty much always had at least one close friend who defied authority, got into trouble, and stirred up shit just because they could. Since Sean and I were going through a cold spot, Joe took his place on occasion. Sometimes Joe would hang out with Sean and me but it seemed to feel wrong, like we just didn't vibe. I think for me it was too much of that wild card. One of those is fine, you get a few in the mix and you can get into some REAL trouble. Joe always wanted to get into REAL trouble. My most vivid memory is one day after school having him, Sean, and Scott (the neighborhood hoodlum who had already broken into a couple houses and would go on to shoot Tim's little brother in the ass with a BB gun) over at the house completely unsupervised. We ate a bunch of junk food and I turned on MTV, which was strictly forbidden by my mom but she didn't live there anymore. Joe then took a set of throwing knives out of his backpack. He had them at school all day. He then demonstrated how to use them in my backyard, throwing them at a tree.

After a while, the novelty of Joe wore off. I realized he was truly a weird dude. Not in the fun weird way that Tim, Sean, and I identified with. He was scary weird. He had a habit of abusing animals, including his own dog. His room smelled like pee because he was too lazy to use the toilet and would pee in the corner. He was the first kid I knew that had Playboys and he had a TON of them. Don't get me wrong, I was fascinated by them, but at that age it was still weird and scary and after awhile I just wanted to play Nintendo. Joe was obsessed. He also stole from me and Sean on multiple occasions but we could never prove it. He was a master thief and manipulator. He had violent mood swings. It didn't make sense to me since he lived in a pretty nice house and his parents were super nice. Most of the messed up kids I knew had broken homes or some telltale sign of neglect. Joe had none of that. We slowly drifted apart as Sean and I decided he was just too weird, even for us. I barely saw him after we finished sixth grade. He was in my health class in Jr. High but he was barely there and after a while we didn't see him at all. The next time I saw him was when my brother slammed the front page of the newspaper

down in front of my cereal bowl one morning during my junior year of high school. Joe's picture was on the front page. He and a friend of his had murdered both of his parents in their sleep. I think he's still in prison. Yeah. Holy shit.

Why the hell did I just tell you that story? Because I almost forgot it happened and that shit is nuts. I don't want to forget that. Also because it represents one of the many roads not taken in my life. Something, I'm not sure what, I used to think it was God but now I don't think I believe that, guided me away from that road that would have probably led me to being that other dude who was there with Joe when he did the horrible deed. I'm not saying I was capable of murder or anything like that, like I said before, I have only punched someone in the face three times. I'm just saying that there was a trajectory, albeit a thin one, and at some point some better part of me took over and said we needed to get the fuck off the Joe train. I cannot deny that there is some greater force at work in my life and the lives of others because I can see those roads not taken, those "bad" trajectories all over the place as I walk back through the journey that is my life up to this point. I know I am not alone in thinking this. I know I am not unique. But I am extremely thankful that that better part of me exists. It is because of this that my faith in humanity and in myself persists. Because I just as easily could have stayed with Joe in that pee stained bedroom. I could have been the Klebold to his Harris.

I think about that all the time. I know I am not an Eric Harris. Eric Harris was a psychopath. Dylan Klebold wasn't. He was an angry suicidal kid who got sucked in. That's me. I get sucked in. Joe was not my last encounter with darkness. At the time, and if I'm being honest, sometimes still, the darkness can be very alluring. Thankfully my better half kicks in at some point and gets me out. I guess for some people it's just all darkness and that's why horrible shit happens.

Wow this is some dark shit for a kid who was 11, in sixth grade, and lived in an upper-middle class suburban haven. I can't imagine what it had been like if I had been less fortunate. Shit, here I am whining about my mom and dad splitting up and I had to go back and forth between my amazing house with my own room and my own bed and a Nintendo and my mom's apartment with HBO, the Disney Channel, and a fridge full of junk food and sodas. Poor me. I guess it's all relative. I know people who are extremely wealthy who are the most depressed people I've ever met. Your environment can't make your problems go away, no matter who you are. I will be the first to admit that I had a whole lot more than most people, especially when you take the entire world into consideration. That still doesn't change the fact that when I was alone in bed all I could think about was what would happen if I was that boy with the balloon and I could just float away and never come back.

If you had asked me at the time, I would have laughed in your face if you told me that was a pretty suicidal thought. I never thought about it that way. I just had come to the realization that no one was ever going to like me and if no one liked me than there was no point in being part of life. I didn't want to die, I just wanted to go someplace where all the kids liked me and we were all best friends and no one ever punched me in the stomach or broke my glasses "by accident."

There are two things that really stick in my head when I think about horrible memories of sixth grade: sixth grade dances and my drunk mom. Whoever came up with the idea of the sixth grade dance should be shot. It was one of those things that no one really wants to do but everyone thinks that everyone else wants to do it so you end up going. You hug the wall as long as you can until you realize that you are the only kid who hasn't slow danced with a girl. You ask all the nice girls if they want to dance and even they say no. You move on down the line to the super nice less attractive girls until finally one of them says yes out of sheer pity. You spend the entirety of Brian Adams' "Everything I Do" sweating and wondering if you're grossing the girl out by your sweat and where the hell are you supposed to put your hands and wondering why you guys are like 2 feet apart while everyone else is only 1 foot apart. Wait, was that just me? I don't know but it really sucked.

My last sixth grade dance was probably the worst. I was going through a jams phase. What were jams? They were these big pants that had crazy prints on them that no one in their right mind would wear but in the early 90's they were considered cool by athletes and professional wrestlers who would use them to work out in. Zubaz were a popular brand of jams. My mom would buy them for me from this street vendor in downtown Encinitas. My favorite pair were bright red and had these Native American looking patterns on them. My second favorite pair were black with white skulls on them. I had a pair of Vans to match these that also had skulls on them. I would compliment these fine pants with one of my many bright neon shirts which also had crazy patterns and/or a surf company logo on them. To top this off I had my fitted Padres hat that my dad got me for my 11th birthday because all the cool kids wore fitted hats like actual baseball players wore. This hat may have been the only remotely cool thing I wore that people actually might have thought was cool if it wasn't worn by a freak wearing bright red workout pants and a clashing neon surf shirt.

I bring up my clothing style because now that I am removed from the situation I find it humorous that I wore those things and that kids rarely made fun of me for my clothes. Maybe it was because it was such low hanging fruit it was just too easy so they had to dig deeper. Maybe it was because that was the style at the time (sort of) and most 6th grade kids dress like spazzes anyways. I still cringe when I look at the pictures though. Did I mention I had a mullet around this time? Yeah, a freaking mullet.

For our final sixth grade dance I choose my fine red jams and a neon orange shirt to compliment it. Sean's mom drove us to the dance and we both were hoping she would just stop at Sizzler instead. A few weeks prior we had resolved not to go. Our moms then colluded to make sure that did not happen since we needed to go in order to learn social skills or some dumb thing like that. Parents, if your kid doesn't want to go to a dance, don't force them to go. Don't be that guy (or girl). Yes, there are certain times it is probably necessary for you to give your kid a little nudge in the right direction. I will admit that. This is NOT one of those times. Especially if your kid has come home crying from the previous three dances and begs you not to make him go and that he will do homework on a Friday night up in his room and go to bed early if you just don't make him go. That might be a sign that it just might be OK for them to sit this one

out.

Sean's mom practically led us to the door to make sure we were in. Once you were in the dance you could not leave until the dance was over. They had a freaking door guard and there was no way to call and have your parent pick you up either because the pay phone was outside. At the second sixth grade dance I tried to fake an asthma attack just so they would call my dad to have him pick me up. I guess I am really bad at faking asthma attacks because the only person who ever bought it was the 80 year old school nurse in junior high school. The Boys and Girls Club people (that was where the dances were held) saw right through me. Seeing as how they dealt with miscreant kids all day who were way craftier than any fat kid trying to fake an illness, I was no match for them.

I gave up on breaking out so I tried to hug the wall as tight as I could and hope for the best. This lasted about 20 minutes before some of the more asshole kids started trying to get me to join their dance circle. I fell into their trap, sadly. I started doing my horrible version of the running man which should have been called the walking fat boy because I couldn't dance to save my life. The worse I got the louder the "Go Brendan" chants became. Then the laughing started. Then I ran into the bathroom and cried. This would not be the last time I spent the majority of a school dance crying in a bathroom. After what seemed like hours, the doors finally opened. I ran to my dad's car and laid across the back seat while we waited for Sean. Thankfully my dad said nothing. I loved laying in the backseat of my dad's car and looking up at the stars and the moon through the window. It brought me some sense of peace. After we dropped off Sean, Dad took me to the video store and let me rent all the wrestling videos I wanted. I stayed up way past my normal bedtime watching The Best of Starcade, trying my hardest to forget what had just happened. It almost worked. Then I went to school on Monday and witnessed some jerk imitating my dance stylings. We got in a fight, I got sent to the time out room. Same story, different day.

The only thing worse than sixth grade dances was my mom, who was really starting to do a Jekyll and Hyde thing as her alcoholism got really bad. It got to the point where I would hide from her a lot because I didn't know if she was going to be angry mom. I was terrified of angry mom. I think one of the reasons I got so big was because we ate out all the time. Like multiple times per week. We would either go to Red Robin or this sports bar called Yogis. I thought that all the kids went to these kind of places to eat practically every night and got to play video games for hours while their mom knocked back several funny sounding drinks like Mai Tai and Long Island Iced Tea. I thought it was perfectly normal to have a collection of Bailey's tins your mom gave you to keep your stamps and baseball cards in. I started realizing it wasn't normal that my mom could go from super wonderful mom to raging angry mom in heartbeat. To this day I cannot deal with people who yell at me at all. I either completely withdraw or I will scream right back at them in some crazy game of one-upmanship that ends in sadness.

About a year later my mom and dad patched things up and my mom moved back in. Everything was great again, or so I thought. I then started Jr. High and realized I just gone from the first to the eighth circle of hell. Not only were all the kids that picked on me in elementary

school there, but a whole bunch of other kids from other elementary schools were there too! Also, there were 8th and 9th graders there. Kids who had gone through puberty! Why anyone thought it would be a good idea to toss some fresh out of elementary school kids with fucking high school freshmen I have no idea. Fuck the guy (or lady) who thought of that.